



# Research & Knowledge

*Interview with Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, professor at SBS-EM, about prioritizing your company's projects*

## The Importance of Focus and Passion is Critical for Success

BY ANTONIO NIETO-RODRIGUEZ

You can't teach passion to people; but you can share your passion. Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez explains how his time as a professor at Solvay Executive MBA sparked more than a new way of thinking.

### Learn from your passion

There's one project in people's lives that is always on time, according to Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, professor of Project Management at [Solvay Brussels School](#) since 2007: your wedding.

It's the one project that people are emotionally connected to and communicate about in the weeks and months before the big day. "If your work projects ran as successfully as your wedding, then I wouldn't need to research the art of managing them" says Antonio.

Antonio, who is chairman of the Project Management Institute and director of the project management office at GlaxoSmithKline Vaccines, is an expert on the topic. In fact, his goal since years was to become the thought leader on the subject, which he recently achieved by being nominated Thinker of the Month by

Thinkers50, the ranking of the most influential persons in the area of management and leadership.

Though **passion** is a key ingredient for success, it almost led to his downfall in 2007, when after 10 years at one of the leading consulting firms, he was fired.

"I had climbed the corporate ladder and was close to the top when I had to write a compelling business plan to become a partner of the firm." Antonio thought he'd made himself indispensable with the unique knowledge he brought.

"I was convinced that my business case was going to work. I wanted to set up a consulting service around project management. But the partners didn't believe in it." After leaving the company, Antonio spent three months regrouping and admits it was one of the toughest times of his life.

"My brain was asking, 'Should I continue working on my passion – project management – or move into a more recognized area, like marketing, finance or IT?' But on reflection, it's been one of the best things that's happened in my career." Leaving the firm freed him up to

satisfy his appetite for knowledge. Since then, he's identified new research and started to teach project management at the Solvay Brussels School.

"Now, I'm one of the leading project management experts in the world" he says. "So, if you get fired, or you're struggling, believe in your passion." Speaking at this [2015 TEDx talk](#), he explains that being fired was a turning point because he learned to change his mindset. "There's research to show that your brain will spend 10 times longer focusing on a negative thought rather than a positive one – the brain is a masochist".

### Having a positive mindset



Nowadays, Antonio focuses on positivity. *"With a positive mindset, while you're going through some of the most painful changes in your life, you can grow and become a better person. The same brain that can be a masochist, can, with the flip of a switch, bring you a feeling of belief, which can 'propel you anywhere'."*

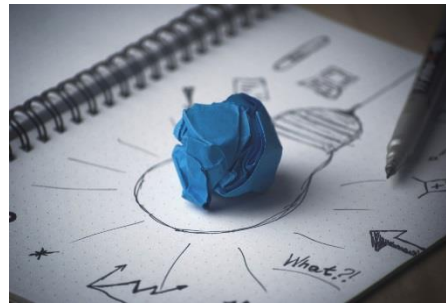
In 2007, he started to work as Head of Post-merger Integration at a leading Belgian bank: he says the job was tough. *"The bank wanted to grow aggressively – not organically, but by acquisition. It was my job to integrate the companies acquired. It was a lot of pressure. Though the integration processes are very similar in most acquisitions, the cultural aspects and level of resistance are always a challenge"*.

After seven years, Antonio found the banking sector "unsexy". He joined the bank during the high of the bubble, when anything was possible and money didn't matter. A few years after the global financial crisis however, the whole industry was immersed in a heavy fog of uncertainty. *"Projects started to hinge on compliance and cost,"* he says. *"There was a general depression in the industry – the bank's main strategic objective was to reduce staff aggressively, so there was nothing motivational about the role. It was painful to go to work."*

So he left. In parallel to his role at the bank, Antonio's career headed down a different track. In 2007, he started speaking at events about his area of expertise, writing for thought leadership publications and teaching. His **advice** to people doing work they don't love is to *"dedicate time to your passion. Then, slowly build it into a business."*

As well as teaching and speaking, Antonio became the chairman of the board of the Project Management Institute, which focuses on collaboration, education and research around the value of project management, both for organizations as well as for individuals. *"It's voluntary work, but it fits with my personal values. I love research and spreading the word"*.

### Five tips from Antonio on project management



**BELIEVE IN THE PROJECT YOU START.** If you don't, don't start it, as there are high chances of failure and issues will spread into other parts of your work and life.

**BE PESSIMISTIC WHEN ESTIMATING.** We tend to be overly optimistic when we calculate duration and workload, often forgetting that there are many interdependencies and external factors that influence our projects. Add at least 20% to your first estimate.

**BUILD A TEAM.** There is no way that you will achieve a project on your own, you will need the support and contribution of your colleagues and stakeholders. Make sure they have a place to contribute and feel part of the team.

**UNDERSTAND, AND THEN FOCUS, ON THE VALUE.** Keep an eye on the inputs to your project, but focus on the impact and benefits – that is what will help you overcome resistance and gain supporters.

**DON'T BE AFRAID TO ADMIT WHEN YOU'RE WRONG OR THAT A PROJECT FAILED.** Some projects will fail. Take them as experiments you can learn from and make sure you do better next time. Don't miss the opportunity to say "this failed": it will build your credibility as a project leader.



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